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INFO RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME 5272  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1190  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 1080  
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 1129  
RUEHBW/AMEMBASSY BELGRADE 2710  
RUEHSQ/AMEMBASSY SKOPJE 4105  
RUEHVJ/AMEMBASSY SARAJEVO 0426  
RUEHVB/AMEMBASSY ZAGREB 2931  
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 0826  
RUEHTH/AMEMBASSY ATHENS 2914  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC  
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RUEHPS/USOFFICE PRISTINA 3410

C O N F I D E N T I A L TIRANA 000564

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DEPT FOR EUR/SCE (MBENEDICT) AND INL/AAE  
NSC FOR BRAUN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/24/2016  
TAGS: [KCRM](#) [PGOV](#) [ASEC](#) [PINR](#) [KFRD](#) [CVIS](#) [KRIM](#) [AL](#)  
SUBJECT: GOA CRACKING DOWN ON ORGANIZED CRIME AND PASSPORT  
FRAUD

REF: A. 05 TIRANA 1461

[1](#)B. TIRANA 398  
[1](#)C. TIRANA 436

Classified By: Ambassador Marcie B. Ries. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Two unrelated, but widely reported arrests were made in recent days, both of which highlight the fight of Albanian police and prosecutors against corruption and organized crime. In the first case, seven members of a drug trafficking network who were laundering proceeds through construction projects were arrested simultaneously in four cities across the country. According to media reports, prosecutors obtained warrants authorizing the seizure of apartment buildings, beach-front property, cash, and luxury vehicles. In the second case, the chief of police and three of his staff in the central Albanian city of Tepelena were arrested for producing false passports. END SUMMARY.

CONSTRUCTION GANG ARRESTED  
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[1](#)2. (SBU) Following a year-long investigation carried out by the Serious Crimes Prosecutor's Office and the Albanian State Police (ASP), the Special Operations Force of the ASP arrested on May 23, 2006 seven members of a drug trafficking and money laundering network. The operation was carried out in simultaneous pre-dawn raids in four cities across Albania: Tirana, Elbasan, Durres, and Vlora. The arrested include the

purported boss of the network, Ilir Kociaj, as well as Geront Tola (AKA Geront Dedja), Zamir Vadardha, Bledar Balliu, Aleksandre Kolici (AKA Aleksandre Gremi), Leonard Cobaj, and Ervin Tavanxhi. The latter is the son of a former Democratic Party (DP) member of parliament, Kozma Tavanxhi, who served between 1992 and 1996. The seven have been charged with international drug trafficking and participation in organized crime. These names have been provided to the Consular Section for inclusion in Consular Lookout and Accountability System.

¶3. (SBU) The investigation was begun last June by the Prosecutor of Serious Crimes, following information obtained from the prosecutor of Florence, Italy, which indicated that the defendants were involved in drug trafficking in the regions of Tuscany and Lombardy in 2003-2004. According to media reports, some of those arrested were wanted by Italian authorities and had fled that country in 2004 following the arrest of 13 other Albanians involved in drug trafficking and organized crime. In addition to trafficking drugs into Italy, the group also reportedly operated in The Netherlands, Germany, and France. During the raids, police seized USD29,000, Euro3,000, LEK1 million, and four new luxury Mercedes-Benz vehicles.

¶4. (SBU) In addition to vehicles, the individuals reportedly invested in construction projects and other fixed assets, including luxury apartments and beach-side villas. Such lucrative investments have become the instrument of choice for money laundering. Prosecutors have established a direct connection between a 12-story apartment building currently under construction in Elbasan and Ilir Kociaj, the purported crime boss and owner of a construction firm in that city. The

Prosecutor's office reportedly has made such solid links to two other apartment-building construction projects in Elbasan and Tirana, as well as the purchase of several luxury apartments in Tirana and beach-front properties in Durres and Vlora. Authorities have frozen the assets and banking accounts of all of the suspected individuals as well as the associated construction companies.

#### CORRUPT POLICE OFFICIAL ARRESTED FOR PASSPORT FRAUD

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¶5. (SBU) On May 23, 2006, Afrim Zeqiri, Chief of police in Tepelena, was arrested along with his driver, Xhevhir Myrtajn, Passport clerk, Ali Hajdini, and Police Inspector, Behar Pasha. These arrests followed the arrest of a wanted individual from Kukes who was found in possession of a passport issued in Tepelena. Zeqiri and the others are accused of having knowingly produced a passport with a false name for a known criminal wanted by the police. Based on an investigation carried out by the Internal Control Service of the Ministry of the Interior, 60 other cases have been uncovered at the Tepelena office in which passports have been issued in names which do not appear in the Civil Registry of that locale. (NOTE: In the Albanian system, there is no central passport issuance agency and passports are issued by regional offices based on birth and civil registration records in that locale. Typically, passports can only be issued for individuals who are registered in that district. END NOTE.) It is believed that applicants paid up to 1000 Euros for a false passport.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: These high profile raids and arrests are examples that Albanian prosecutors and police can point to they work to demonstrate that they are serious about cleaning things up. The next step will be getting these criminals convicted. It will be interesting to see how the process plays out between the police, the prosecutors, and the judges, particularly in the current overheated political climate. These high profile cases underscore the importance of cooperation between prosecutors and police in attacking organized crime and corruption (see reftel C). End Comment.

RIES